Helen Halyard (1950-2023), a life dedicated to the liberation of the working class

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Helen Halyard, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Party (US), died suddenly on November 28, 2023, at the age of 73.

Helen fought for the perspective of world socialist revolution throughout her political life, which spanned more than 50 years. She joined the Young Socialists, youth movement of the Workers League, in 1971, and soon after joined the party itself. Her decision to join the Trotskyist movement was a highly conscious political act, the result of her political radicalization under the combined impact of the civil rights struggles and the movement against the war in Vietnam.

Helen had initially joined a radical youth group called the Third World Liberation Front, but rapidly concluded that what was required was a revolutionary perspective directed to uniting the entire working class. She rejected and broke with the perspective of black or "third world" nationalism, and sought out a perspective of unifying the international working class on the basis of a revolutionary program. This was a perspective fought for only by the Trotskyist movement, represented by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and in the United States at that time by the Workers League and its youth group, the Young Socialists (now the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality).

From her first days in the party, her energy, determination and political seriousness were remarkable. Helen was elected to the Central Committee of the Workers League and as national secretary of the Young Socialists. In March 1974, Helen became the first candidate for public office in the history of the Workers League, running for Congress in the 12th District of New York, which comprised Bedford-Stuyvesant and nearby areas in Brooklyn.

Her initial campaign announcement declared:

> I was born in Brownsville and raised in Bedford-Stuyvesant. In the areas where I lived, near Gates and Stuyvesant, there are now only vacant lots or very old tenement houses. I went to Junior High School 57 and attended Franklin Delano Roosevelt High School. In the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn you can find some of the worst education in the country. The buildings are near collapse, and the funds for facilities in the schools have been drastically cut back.

The focus of the campaign was on the necessity for the working class to establish its political independence from the capitalist two-party system and wage a political struggle against both the Nixon administration and the Democratic Party. The statement continued:

> We are fighting to bring forward the great hatred that workers have for Nixon and give it a political direction. This hatred exists not only for Nixon but for the Democrats as well. Neither party can offer any alternative to combat unemployment, poor housing, wage-cutting and inflation. I will be running in order to expose them for who they represent: the large corporations.

The 23-year-old Trotskyist challenged the incumbent Democrat, Representative Shirley Chisholm, who had made headlines in 1972 as the first black woman to seek the Democratic presidential nomination.

> For as long as Chisholm has been serving, the conditions in Bedford-Stuyvesant have only gotten worse. All the poverty programs which she and the Democrats have so vehemently supported, including Model Cities, are almost completely gone.
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> Our campaign … is not a protest for jobs or better conditions but to actually construct a new leadership within the working class. It is only our movement that can meet this breakdown in the capitalist system with socialist policies. We have no illusions that this system can be reformed. That is why our fight to construct a labor party is a step toward bringing the working class to power.

In that period, the Workers League carried forward the call by Trotsky, issued after the formation of the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) unions in the 1930s, for the mass working class movement to take a political form through the building of a labor party based on the unions. After the transformation of the unions into corporatist institutions wholly subordinate to the corporations and the capitalist state, the Workers League shifted the form of its fight for the political independence of the working class by transforming the League into the Socialist Equality Party, withdrawing the labor party demand, and posing as the immediate task before workers and young people the building of the SEP as the revolutionary leadership of the working class. Comrade Helen entirely supported this change and fought for it.

The conflict with Tim Wohlforth

A major turning point in Helen's political development came in the aftermath of Tim Wohlforth's desertion from the Workers League. Wohlforth, who had been its first national secretary, became increasingly disoriented as the Vietnam anti-war movement broke down following the signing of the peace treaty in January 1973.

Wohlforth elevated his partner Nancy Fields to the role of effective co-leader of the Workers League, despite her total lack of knowledge of

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Marxist theory and Trotskyist principles. From mid-1973 until the summer of 1974, Wohlforth and Fields carried out a wrecking operation within the Workers League, all the while concealing from the Workers League and the International Committee Fields' close family ties with a high-ranking CIA agent.

Upon learning in August 1974 of this staggering breach of security, the Workers League Central Committee removed Wohlforth as national secretary and suspended Fields pending an investigation. Both refused to collaborate with the investigation, deserted the party, denounced any concern for the security of the movement, and rejoined the Socialist Workers Party, from which Wohlforth had broken in 1964.

Helen Halyard attended that Central Committee meeting and supported the political struggle for a determined orientation to the working class and the renewal of the fight against the anti-Trotskyist revisionism of the Pabloites, which was at the heart of the conflict with Wohlforth.

Helen made a highly significant political development in the course of the fight against Wohlforth's opportunism, emerging as a central leader of the party. She attended the Sixth Congress of the International Committee in May 1975, which voted to begin the investigation into Security and the Fourth International, initiated by the ICFI after Wohlforth and then Joseph Hansen, the political leader of the SWP, denounced concern for security against state infiltration and surveillance as "paranoia."

Helen was not just a national but an international leader, profoundly oriented toward the development of the ICFI as an international party. She traveled widely and became familiar with many of the leaders of the ICFI, working for a time in the British section and attending meetings and conferences overseas.

In her early years of political activity, Helen became well known to thousands of workers in New York City, particularly transit workers and workers at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and Brooklyn Union Gas, where the Workers League was then focusing its efforts to reach industrial workers. She was a powerful speaker, with a huge impact on the workers and youth who attended party meetings and rallies.

The case of Gary Tyler

One of her most important interventions was in the case of Gary Tyler, framed up in Louisiana at the age of 16 for the shooting of a 13-year-old white youth when a white mob attacked a bus transporting students from Destrehan High School, which had only recently been integrated. Tyler was convicted by an all-white jury and sentenced to death.

The Young Socialists publicized the case throughout the United States, distributing tens of thousands of fliers, thousands of copies of a pamphlet explaining the case, and winning support from broad layers of workers, including union leaders representing many millions.

The campaign culminated in a march through Harlem in 1976 in which hundreds of youth participated. Helen and Tom Henehan—a leading member of the Workers League who died in a political assassination in October 1977—led this campaign. Helen formed a close relationship with the Tyler family, particularly Gary's mother Juanita. Helen visited her in Destrehan, and Juanita Tyler came to Detroit for a Young Socialists conference where the defense of Gary Tyler was the main focus.

When the US Supreme Court issued its ruling in 1976 reestablishing the death penalty but striking down mandatory sentencing laws like those in Louisiana, Gary was taken off Death Row. He remained in prison however for 41 years, despite court findings that his original conviction was unconstitutional. He was only released in 2016, after the Supreme Court struck down life sentences without parole for those, like Gary, convicted as juveniles.

The Workers League moved its center from New York City to Detroit in 1978-79 and Helen herself moved to Detroit, welcoming the opportunity to take up the fight for socialism among autoworkers at GM, Ford and Chrysler, and other sections of industrial workers. She soon became widely known and respected among workers throughout the Detroit area.

When the party established the position of assistant national secretary, it was natural to turn to Helen to fill it. This role required a combination of boundless and unflagging energy, deep familiarity with the party cadre, thorough knowledge of the party's program and political heritage, political maturity and determination. Helen had all of these qualities, and she spearheaded the day-to-day work of the party for more than 30 years.

This was particularly important during the 1980s, when the party played a critical role in the struggle against the betrayal of Trotskyism by the leaders of the Workers Revolutionary Party in Britain—Gerry Healy, Michael Banda and Cliff Slaughter. The British section, which had led the fight against the unprincipled reunification of the US Socialist Workers Party with the Pabloites in 1963, moved sharply to the right in the course of the 1980s.

David North, the national secretary of the Workers League, made the initial critique of Healy's break with Marxism in 1982 and led the struggle against the outright opportunism and abandonment of Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution that erupted in the 1985-86 split within the International Committee. This struggle culminated in the victory of the Trotskyist majority in the ICFI and the defeat of Healy, Banda and Slaughter, all of whom abandoned revolutionary politics.

Helen supported this political struggle, and it became the driving force of the Workers League's fight for socialist principles within the American working class. As assistant national secretary, Helen always had her finger on the pulse of the party. She threw herself into all the day-to-day problems of building the party, and she was not afraid to grapple with the difficulties that comrades—whether new members or veterans—were facing.

She did this, not by lowering political standards but rather by focusing attention on the revolutionary possibilities of the moment. There was never a time when she exhibited discouragement. She had a thoroughly realistic appraisal of difficulties, did not brush them aside, but fought them through rather than make compromises, whether it was to convince a worker to make a donation or to raise the level of a party member's work to that required by the political situation. She convinced by education and example.

Helen as a party candidate

Helen's ability to conduct a patient but intransigent struggle was a consistent feature of all her work. She could speak to anyone, and especially to workers, of all races, genders, ages and experiences. This made her a formidable public representative of the party, and she carried out this important task in election campaigns for Congress in 1974 and 1976, and for vice president in 1984, the first time the Workers League ran in a national campaign. The presidential candidate was Ed Winn, a socialist transit worker from New York City, who had joined the party during the campaign in defense of Gary Tyler. In 1985, Helen was the party's candidate for mayor of Detroit.

In 1992, Helen herself was the Workers League candidate for US president. This was the first presidential election held after the collapse of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, which demonstrated the historical bankruptcy of the perspective of Pabloite revisionism against which the Workers League had fought throughout its history. Stalinism was not, as Pablo and Mandel claimed, a progressive force capable of fighting and defeating imperialism. It was rather the agency of

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imperialism within the first workers' state, whose counterrevolutionary role culminated in the dissolution of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism.

Far from representing "the end of history," as theorists and apologists of world capitalism claimed, the collapse of the USSR opened the road for a reassertion of imperialist militarism on a colossal scale, beginning with the Persian Gulf War, in which the United States destroyed most of the Iraqi army and reconquered Kuwait, although still holding back from a direct march on Baghdad. This was still six months before the formal dissolution of the USSR, although the end was visible.

These great historical questions framed the 1992 Workers League campaign, which was above all an international campaign, seeking to build not just the Trotskyist party in America but the International Committee as a whole. Comrade Helen took the Workers League campaign to Europe, South Asia and Australia. She was particularly proud that the largest meetings she addressed in the fall campaign were in Sri Lanka, where she spoke to supporters brought together in Colombo and Kandy by the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI.

Helen was in the thick of every campaign of the Workers League and the Socialist Equality Party. That included the 1993 Mack Avenue Fire inquiry, organized to expose the terrible housing and poverty in Detroit and the deadly impact of utility shutoffs after a house fire killed seven children, and their parents were prosecuted as scapegoats by the city government. Helen was one of six commissioners who led a Citizens' Inquiry that indicted the capitalist system and the Democratic Party establishment, which had long controlled Detroit, and issued demands for an end to utility shutoffs—the immediate cause of the fire—and the provision of essentials like electricity, heat and water as basic human rights for all.

From the Workers League to the SEP and the WSWS

In 1995, the Workers League made the decision to launch the Socialist Equality Party. This transformation involved more than a change of name but put an end to the period when the party had focused on placing demands on the trade unions to expose their bureaucratic leaders. The SEP told workers that the old organizations had become incapable of reform or of responding to pressure from the rank and file. They were bureaucratic shells that responded only to the dictates and needs of the capitalist ruling elite, transmitted through the Democratic Party. Workers had to build new organizations and join the SEP in order to carry out that fight.

Two years later, in response to the opportunities presented by the spread of computer technology and the growth of the internet, the SEP and its sister parties in the International Committee launched a joint global publication, the *World Socialist Web Site*. This was sustained by the political and editorial work of every section of the ICFI, replacing the printed newspapers published by the various sections separately. The WSWS has become the most widely read socialist publication in the world and the authoritative voice of Trotskyism, recognized as such even by its bitter enemies.

Comrade Helen played a powerful role in both of these developments. She remained as assistant national secretary until 2008, leading much of the practical political work, including interventions in the mass antiwar protests against the Iraq war in 2003. She continued to demonstrate her commitment to the defense of political prisoners, writing extensively on the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal and more broadly on questions of black nationalism and the history of the civil rights struggle.

In 2008, facing mounting health issues, Helen stepped down as assistant national secretary at the Founding Congress of the SEP in the United States, but she remained on the party's National Committee and continued to play a major role in the political leadership.

Only in the final years of her life, after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, did Helen find herself compelled to limit her active participation in public political work, although she continued to meet remotely and participate in education and fund-raising, where she excelled.

As a personality, Helen reflected the best traditions of the African American working class, which rallied to the Communist Party in the immediate aftermath of the 1917 October Revolution. She was highly cultured, well read in the literature produced by the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, itself heavily influenced by the Russian Revolution, and familiar with later developments among black intellectuals. Her own contributions, such as an essay on "ebonics," the supposed "black language" embraced by the school board in Oakland, California, clearly expressed her opposition to the cultural backwardness promoted by the nationalists. (See Ebonics and the danger of racialist politics: A socialist viewpoint, April 21, 1997.)

Helen had the deepest respect for the cadres of the Trotskyist movement, both those like herself who were won to Trotskyism in the early 1970s, newer people just coming into politics who looked to her for guidance, and especially the relative handful of older members of the Fourth International who had survived the betrayals of Stalinism and Pabloism.

This was demonstrated particularly in relation to Jean Brust, who, along with her husband Bill, was among the very few members of the Socialist Workers Party, veterans of the great labor struggles of the 1930s and 1940s, to remain lifelong leading participants in the world Trotskyist movement. When Jean, then 76, faced her final health struggles in 1997, Helen moved to Minneapolis for several months to take charge of her care. Later she organized the memorial meeting held for Jean in the Twin Cities, commemorating her lifetime of activity, more than 60 years, in the Trotskyist movement.

Helen had the same attitude to Nadezha Joffe, daughter of Adolph Joffe, the Soviet diplomat and close collaborator with Trotsky. Adolph Joffe committed suicide in 1927 in protest over Trotsky's expulsion from the Soviet Communist Party. Nadezhda Joffe visited the United States in conjunction with the publication by Mehring Books of her 1993 memoir, *Back in Time, My Life, My Fate, My Epoch*. This is the only memoir written in the post-Stalin Soviet Union by a surviving member of the Left Opposition.

After Helen and the SEP organized a book launch in New York City, Nadezhda Joffe gave her an autographed copy of the book, inscribed with the message, "Helen, With regards and thankfulness from the author, N. Joffe." Helen kept the volume in a treasured place among her many books.

In conclusion, it is best to let Helen speak for herself, as she always did so clearly and forcefully. Addressing the Emergency Conference Against War, held by the SEP and IYSSE in Ann Arbor, Michigan on March 31-April 1, 2007, she made the following contribution:

> The question has arisen as to our long-term strategy, and its relation to our current activities. Our long-term strategy is the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist society. There are no easy answers to the problems and the conditions of oppression that face millions all over the world, whether you are talking about the fight against unemployment, the struggle against imperialist war, the fight against the attacks on democratic rights. There are no answers outside the independent mobilization of the working class.
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> The working class is the only class within capitalist society, because of its relationship to the means of production, which is not

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tied to the defense of the nation-state. Working people have an enormous potential to change society and control the means of production, and it is our task to make them conscious of that. This requires learning the lessons of previous struggles, as other speakers have said. We must draw lessons from the strategic experiences of masses of people in the course of the 20th century.

When I came into political life, it was during the course of the massive civil rights struggles in the United States that radicalized tens of thousands of black youth and brought them into opposition to conditions of poverty, unemployment and racism. They participated in this movement in order to change the conditions of both racism and economic oppression.

The petty-bourgeois leadership that led the movement for civil rights separated the struggle against racism from its source in the existing economic system of capitalism. They said it was possible to change things, not by putting an end to the system, but by reforming it. The impact of this perspective is clear. Who were the beneficiaries of the policy of affirmative action?

During the past 30 years, there has been an enormous stratification in the black population, with a tiny layer enriching itself and becoming very active in the existing political structures. This layer includes extremely right-wing political figures—Condoleezza Rice, Clarence Thomas and Colin Powell—while the conditions for black workers and youth in the inner cities remain the same and in some cases are worse than in an earlier period. This inequality is the product of the perspective that one can fight against inequality without addressing the social conditions that have created inequality.

The issue of practical vs. impractical solutions has been raised at this conference and in answering this it is critical to understand that the only practical solution to the problems is the independent political mobilization of the working class. Any attempt to find a shortcut to these problems will lead inevitably to betraying the historic interests of masses of working people.

We say in the resolution, “In fighting for this program, workers and youth internationally must base themselves on the struggle for the political independence of the working class, in conflict with those parties and tendencies that seek to direct, in one way or another, popular opposition into the safe channels of the political establishment.” This is an extremely important conception and one that has to be assimilated along with the other sections of the resolution in the development of a political movement of the international working class that has to be based on the historical experiences of the working class.

This is the perspective to which Helen Halyard devoted her life and for which the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International continue to fight.

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